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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses error analysis, which is based upon the premise that all language, even "incorrect" language, is governed by rules, and the application of such analysis to the comma splice and the fused sentence. Many students formulate erroneous theories of punctuation based on spoken-language experience or on misleading definitions; in effect, they have good intentions but use bad procedures. The paper presents six patterns to which most comma splices and fused sentences conform, indicating that teachers should avoid instruction by definitions or rules and focus instead on providing a vocabulary with which related ideas can be logically connected. (RL)

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AN APPLICATION OF ERROR ANALYSIS TO COMMA SPLICES AND FUSED SENTENCES

Paper Presented to the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Kansas City, April 2, 1977.

A concern with error is certainly not new to teachers of English. Error in writing and in speech has long been perceived as a barrier to upward mobility, and a desire to speak and write "correctly" has spawned numberless prescriptive grammars. Discussions of how best to eliminate error have dominated our professional journals; and, more recently, we have engaged in heated debates on what error is, and how prescriptive our grammar should be.

Error analysis presents yet another way to view error. Its ultimate source in the theories of Piaget and Chomsky, and buttressed by rich research into the consistently predictable errors of children as they learn their first language and of adults as they learn their second, error analysis has been successfully utilized by teachers of English as a second language. (An excellent collection of essays has been published in this field: New Frontiers in Second Language Learning, ed. John H. Schumann and Nancy Stenson (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury, 1975). And, very recently, error analysis has been applied to the writing of college students in basic skills programs. (Error is the subject of the first issue (Spring, 1975) of the new journal Basic Writing, coming out of the City College of New York; and it is also the subject of an excellent new book by Mina Shaughnessey, Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

Error analysis is based upon the premise that all language, even "incorrect" language, is governed by rules. Inevitable in the learning of any language,

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errors are caused by the learner's strategies of learning the target language, and they measure his progress toward accurate intuition of its underlying patterns. That is, errors are much more than mistakes; they reflect the learner's theory of language. For this reason, they are an invaluable source of information to the teacher who will use them to intuit the learner's perception of the rules of the language and to gradually increase the accuracy of his perceptions. In the coming years, not only will this technique undoubtedly provide more effective way of dealing with students' writing errors, but it will also provide more insight into the compositional process itself, into the way the mind works as it struggles to produce written language.

Nowhere, it seems to me, can error analysis be better applied than to sentence structure. A student's formation of comma splices (two sentences joined by a comma) or fused sentences (two sentences joined together with no punctuation at all) reveals his theory of the boundary of a sentence. (Note: sometimes comma splices and fused sentences are referred to as "run ons".) Often his theory of a sentence is perfectly accurate in spoken English. For example, the sentence "Women don't want to be used for their bodies only, that isn't liberation, it's bondage" is perfectly correct in conversation. It becomes a comma splice only when set down on paper with commas instead of a semicolon and period. Consequently, these errors are extremely resistant to change, since the "run ons" in speech are constantly reinforced. Commas and periods exist only in written form, and a student learning to write has nothing in his experience of oral language to help him with them.

This attempt to transfer oral language to paper produces one of the most common and misleading theories of the sentence: "A sentence ends when you take

a breath." Who would be so short-winded to have to breathe in the middle of the word group, "John went home, he went to bed"? A more sophisticated version of this "breathing" rule is the "pause" rule: "Put a comma for a short pause and a period for a long pause." This strategy is especially comfortable for students fluent in spoken language, newly exposed to the intricacies of writing. But by what infinitesimal seconds does a student measure a pause? Who would judge the pause in "John went home, he went to bed" to be longer than the pause in "After John went home, he went to bed"?

Not all erroneous theories of a sentence are formulated by the student from his experience of spoken language. Too often, his errors are caused by misleading difinitions given to him by his own teachers. One of the most treacherous of these is: "A sentence expresses a complete thought." If you were a student, which of these two statements would you judge to be more complete?

"He went home."

"Going home to his walk up apartment at the corner of 125th Street and Broadway."

Often a student will consider a sentence to be incomplete if it contains a pronoun with an antecedent in the previous sentence. For example, the sentence "He went home" seems incomplete because we don't know who "he" is, and so the student quite logically joins the sentence to the previous one, to form the comma splice "John was tired, he went home."

Many students form their idea of "sentence" from length. To these students, a small group of words is a fragment, while a long group of words is a comma splice or run on. "He went home" would seem much too short to be a sentence, while "Going home to his walk up apartment at the corner of 125th Street and Broadway"

might seem just right. A student with this theory of a sentence would be very surprised to find a word group as short as "John was tired, he went home" marked as a comma splice on his paper.

It would seem from these erroneous ideas of "sentence", that we must turn to grammar for a functioning definition. However, here too we create misleading conceptions of the boundaries of the sentence when we teach that "A sentence is a group of words with a subject and a verb." According to this rule, "If John went home" would be complete, since it has a subject "John" and a verb "went." The next step is to give the students a list of confunctions to learn, and to tell them that for each word on this list, a complete sentence must have two pairs of subjects and verbs. Unfortunately, many words used as conjunctions are also used as prepositions, and a student who is told that "after" is a conjunction would be hard put to explain why "After all his work, he went home, he went to bed" is a comma splice, and "After he went home, he went to bed" is complete. The word "and" is especially tricky in this respect, since it can join almost any two identical grammatical forms--nouns, prepositional phrases, and verbs, as well as clauses. And if two pairs of subjects and verbs without any conjunction is correct, what is correct about a sentence like "He knew he was right." It has two pairs of subjects and verbs: "he knew" and "he was." When we explain that relative pronouns like "that" can be understood, the student may wonder why conjunctions like "because" can't be understood, as well. Finally, there is inevitably some confusion about which words are conjunctions and which words are not. "However" means the same as "although," and it must seem very arbitrary to the student that "The sentence looked wrong, although actually it was correct" is right, while "The sentence looked wrong, however actually it was correct" is a comma splice.

Comma splices are resistant to correction because most of them make sense. Whether the student is following the "breath" rule, listening for the "complete thought," or trying to count conjunctions, most of his comma splices and fused sentences show tight logical connections. In fact, because of the closeness in meaning between the two parts of a comma splice or fused sentence, a student may well sense a short pause (comma), instead of a long pause (period). Or he might quite rightly sense that both parts are necessary for a "complete thought." For the most part, his errors reveal an inherent and correct instinct to link closely related ideas; it is only his procedure which is wrong. The intelligence of his errors is indicated by the predictable and logical patterns to which most comma splices and fused sentences conform. These patterns will be the subject of the remainder of this paper.

Pattern 1. By far the largest category of comma splices and fused sentences consists of sentences joined by adverbs like "however," "indeed," or "therefore," or by prepositional phrases like "at this time," or "in addition." In these examples, the student has expressed the connection between his ideas; his only error is in the choice of the wrong grammatical form.

1. A child at times will be temporarily comforted by his peers, however the lack of a mothering figure at the instant the baby cries will hurt the child's development.

2. Many people might vehemently disagree with Bettelheim's beliefs, however, the Israeli kibbutz, a communal society village, bears out the doctor's findings as correct.

3. When a new trick or subject is to be taught, the instructor introduces the subject continuously repeating it until the student "catches on" at this point a reward is given, usually a "good dog" or "good student."

4. Mr. Wallace, in my opinion, was a strong presidential candidate until he was shot and confined to a wheelchair, at this time his presidential dream was just that--a dream.

5. The myths in short make Northern blacks feel that they are superior to our southern brothers and sisters, also we believe that the south is still very prejudiced with the klan lynching and burning.

6. Attempts to enforce morality are nothing new, indeed the history of our country is full of such attempts.

7. Theory isn't any good until you learn how to use it, then it becomes more meaningful.

8. These people have no right to complain if someone in an elected office does something which they do not approve of, after all if they had gone out to vote, someone else might be in that office.

9. Kunta Kinte named his child Kizzy, fortunately the master didn't object.

10. For a little over a few months, I roomed with a close friend, unfortunately a regretful (sic) situation evolved.

11. The migrant workers were paid very little, therefore the owners were told to increase their wages.

12. Victimless crimes are a threat to no one, therefore we should grant everyone their right to the first amendment.

Pattern 2. Often the first section of a comma splice or fused sentence presents data, and the second section draws a conclusion from this data. In these examples, the idea of "therefore" is present but not expressed.

1. The average age of baseball pitchers is 26, he is over the hill.

2. The world cannot support this type of growth, decisions will have to be made.

3. He began to realize that whatever weapons he found, whites had more and wherever he went, he was still in danger, he began to realize that overpowering whites was unlikely.

4. The Mets already have the best starting pitchers in their division, this trade will do more harm than good.

5. You are taking a journey by car and you have Mars square Uranus in your chart, which tends to cause recklessness and dangerous sudden action, when daily aspects are the same it would be wise to leave another day.

6. Columbia was altogether different from Atlanta, it was more like home mixed with forest preserve, it even had roaches.

Pattern 4. A negative statement is often followed by a positive statement. Once a student writes what didn't happen, he tells what did happen.

1. She couldn't name the children or raise the male child, these responsibilities were bestowed upon the father.

2. They did not limit their discussions to school matters, either, they also talked about their personal lives.

3. One doesn't have to worry about drycleaning he just throws his jeans in the wash.

4. However, some instructors don't agree that this is the way to teach, they feel that the correct way to reach a student is through pessimistic doom.

5. Chiropractors don't treat people just for back trouble, they look for misalignment of the spine.

6. That isn't liberation, it's bondage.

Pattern 5. Sometimes comma splices and fused sentences result from a description of steps in a process. Often the connecting idea, expressed or unexpressed, is "then."

1. Dial-a-Van service should be offered. A potential user of the van calls a prearranged number, he or she then says where they would like to go and for how long.

2. John went home, he ate supper and watched T.V.

Pattern 6. Often a sentence will be added to explain or expand upon a word in the first part of the comma splice or fused sentence. In these examples, the word serving as the cue to add an explanation is underlined.

1. With this great amount of money, they have the ability to diversify their stocks, diversification is the name of the game.

2. Just saw what happened to Yoki, she was thrown off Robert Samson's place because of her son.

3. The plan worked to a certain extent, William's escape was successful but Clotel's was not.

4. Another example is a friend of mine who lived next door, he dropped out of school when he was a junior.

5. There is still another method of getting nutrients we need, that way is vitamin pills.

6. At this time they are desperate they will do anything.

Outside of these patterns. These 6 patterns are not, of course, exhaustive. Here are some sentences which seem very closely connected in idea, but that connection is difficult to express.

1. He was now gone and Clotel was left heart-broken, all she had now was Mary, the daughter they had once shared.

2. Physically disabled people, generally, are omitted from sports, there are a few exceptions, wheelchair basketball is one, but even they have able-bodied members on the team.

3. He wanted her to pass it down to her children and grandchildren, Kinte succeeded in passing down his heritage and keeping his name without the master knowing.

4. This depression could last for days or weeks, sometimes it seems they never come out of it.

Once we see these pattens, what do we do? The first step, it seems, is to provide a vocabulary in which to express logical connections. For example, we can encourage students to use the words "because" or "since" to draw conclusions from data. We can suggest the use of "instead" (making clear that it is not a conjunction, of course) when a student follows a negative idea with a positive idea. In addition, providing the student with lists of comma splices and fused sentences and asking him to find and express the logical connections between them might further his understanding of "sentence" much more than merely asking him to correct them with a period. Showing students the logic and intelligence behind their errors might give them a more constructive attitude in dealing with them. Even the terms we use now, like "fragment" or "run on" imply that their ideas are fragmented or that their prose is out of control, "running on," and students may be reassured by knowing that this is far from the truth.

But, if anything is to be learned from the study of error analysis, it is the avoidance of the easy answer, which has done so much damage to the prose of

our students. We must avoid partial truths like "A sentence is a complete thought," or "A sentence is a group of words with a subject and a verb" and teach students the boundaries of sentences the hard way, beginning with the core subject and verb and then going on methodically to embedded structures--phrases, appositives, clauses. And, instead of just correcting his errors, we must understand, and make him understand, the thought process which produced those errors. And we must believe, and instill in the student a belief, in the intelligence of his mistakes.

Appendix: Word groups referred to in the text of this paper.

1. Women don't want to be used for their bodies only, that isn't liberation, it's bondage.
2. John went home, he went to bed.
3. After John went home, he went to bed.
4. He went home.
5. Going home to his walk up apartment at the corner of 125th Street and Broadway.
6. John was tired, he went home.
7. If John went home.
8. After all his work he went home, he went to bed.
9. After he went home, he went to bed.
10. He knew he was right.
11. The sentence looked wrong, although actually it was correct.
12. The sentence looked wrong, however actually it was correct.